

The (new) places of urban regeneration

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Abstract

This contribution explores the relationships between urban regeneration programmes and the descriptions of deprived neighbourhoods. It draws on both theoretical reflections on the contribution of policy instruments to the construction of problems they are meant to deal with and empirical work on the implementation of a specific area-based initiative.

Keywords: urban regeneration, area-based programmes, deprived neighbourhoods.

Introduction

This paper is a discussion on the ways deprived neighbourhoods are described in policy instruments devised in order to tackle their problems. Put in a slightly different way, this paper is a reflection on the relationships between urban policies targeting deprived areas and the construction of urban deprivation problems: what is the contribution of urban regeneration policies to the construction of urban problems? How do the descriptions of target areas urban regeneration policies are based on highlight some features of the areas they target at the expense of other features? What problems are taken into account? What problems are neglected? How do these descriptions change during the policy process?

The main idea underpinning this contribution is that policy instruments do contribute to the construction of problems they are meant to deal with. As Pier Luigi Crosta (1995: 72) states: the process of setting up public policies is not only a process of

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setting up solutions, but also a process of definition of problems. As a consequence, “singling out a problem is not only a precondition for setting up policies, it is rather an outcome (a by-product) of it”.

This idea can be traced back to Blumer’s reflections on social problems as outcomes of collective behaviour (1971). More recently, a similar approach has been developed by Estèbe (2004) for the analysis of national policies targeting deprived areas in France (*politique de la ville*) since the early 1980s. Estèbe (2004 : 48) highlights that “En vingt ans, les ‘quartiers’ de la politique de la ville ont fait l’objet d’un processus continu de redéfinition, de reconstruction et de recomposition, scandé par les alternances politiques...”. What is more “La production du point de vue constitue un travail politique essentiel : l’institution qui produit le point de vue inclue, nécessairement, dans la représentation qu’elle construit, ses propres enjeux, sa propre théorie du territoire et ses propres finalités” (Estèbe, 2004: 68).

Given this theoretical framework, this article focuses on a specific policy instrument¹ which has increasingly spread throughout Europe for the last decades: area-based and integrated urban regeneration programmes. These programmes are largely widespread also due to the support of the EU, which has stressed the urban dimension of the Union and national sectoral policies and has directly promoted and funded area-based urban regeneration programmes (Atkinson, 2001; 2007; Cremaschi, 2005; Parkinson, 2005). Urban problems are considered to be multidimensional and concentrated in specific areas. As a consequence, urban policies have included not only interventions on built-up areas and on the environment, but also social, economic, and cultural interventions.

This approach to urban problems can be related to a view of urban development focused on satisfying human needs through innovation at the level of neighbourhood community governance. Such approach was developed in the early 2000s and inspired alternative strategies to urban issues such as the Integrated Area Development agenda. The latter stresses the necessity to connect a socially innovative view of development (basic needs satisfaction, cultural emancipation, social and

political empowerment) to an active networking of agents and resources across various spatial scales and institutional settings, but with a strong focus on improving the quality of life in area-based communities” (Moulaert et al, 2007: 196). Within this policy framework, innovative urban regeneration discourses and practices were produced. The latter intertwined with different policy fields.

As far as Italy is concerned, many area-based and integrated programmes targeting deprived urban neighbourhoods were promoted and funded by the European Union (EU), the National Government and some regional governments. These programmes increasingly included social and economic actions besides actions concerning the built environment and the environment and were based on the involvement of the public, the private and the voluntary sectors. Thus, by and large, one can state that policy instruments in Italy partly shifted from a sectoral, top-down and physical approach towards an area-based, integrated and bottom-up approach to urban issues². Within this framework one can wonder if and how did the descriptions of neighbourhoods included in the projects help to spread a new point of view, looking at urban problems highlighting their multidimensional character and their concentration in specific areas.

This paper focuses on Southern Italy’s urban deprived areas. Its main goal is to highlight if and how did the area-based initiatives targeting deprived areas which were set up and implemented in the last 15-20 years in Southern Italy contribute to both produce different images of deprivation and shed light on its multidimensional character.

The reflections developed in this paper are mainly based on the analysis of the description of urban deprived areas in a Southern Italy region (Apulia). In particular, we will analyze the descriptions which were developed within a specific urban program: *Programmi Integrati di Riqualificazione delle Periferie/Integrated Programmes for the Rehabilitation of Urban Peripheries (PIRP)*. PIRP is an area-based programme launched by the Apulia Regional Government in 2006, and it was strongly based on previous experiences in the regional context within

both EU and national programs (cfr. Tedesco, 2009). However, some reflections concerning the wider context of regional urban policy will be also developed.

This paper is divided into three sections following this introduction. In the first section the meaningfulness of the EU discourse on urban deprivation for Southern Italy peripheries is discussed. The second section focuses on the outcomes of the PIRP programs in terms of production of new descriptions of urban problems with reference to some cases. In the third and final section some questions that are still open are raised.

The EU discourse on urban issues and the Italian Mezzogiorno peripheries

What are the descriptions of deprived neighbourhoods which emerge from the European discourse on cities?

Since the late 1990s the EU discourse on cities has been developed in several successive documents (CCE 1997; 1998; 2006). All of them acknowledge that EU cities on the one hand are the 'drivers' of economic development, but on the other they are places where social, economic and environmental problems are concentrated in specific areas: "a number of inner city areas face acute problems of urban decay and social exclusion. This is reflected in below average levels of GDP per head and high levels of unemployment but also in pockets of deprivation, crime and social unrest in many of the more prosperous cities" (CEC, 2008: 5-6). Yet, "Cities play a crucial role as engines of the economy, as places of connectivity, creativity and innovation, and as centres of services for their surrounding areas. Due to their density, cities offer a huge potential for energy savings and a move towards a carbon-neutral economy. Cities are, however, also places where problems such as unemployment, segregation and poverty are concentrated" (EU, 2011: VI).

Do these descriptions fit Southern Europe cities? Some authors analysed the specificities of Southern Europe cities in the face of the most recent major urban challenges (Seixas, Albet, 2010: 775): for many of these cities there has been a distinct path of

urban development and restructuring. In particular, the problems of Southern Europe cities do not perfectly fit the ways in which cities were defined as a policy problem by EU documents (Chorianopoulos, 2010). In fact, EU urban policies were drawn on the acknowledgement of pockets of deprivation within wealthy cities and regions. However, this does not fit the situation of pockets of severe deprivation within 'lagging' cities and regions. As a consequence, if breaking the barriers between pockets of deprivation and the rest of the city is a strategy to foster new development paths in Northern and Central Europe deprived areas, this is a very meaningful objective, but very often it is totally insufficient to foster local development in Southern Europe (Tedesco, forthcoming).

As far as Italy is concerned, Padovani (2010: 37) highlights that "in Italy the problem of social and spatial exclusion was considered a policy issue later and in a softer way than in other European countries. Spatial features assumed by poverty are still the object of research debates in a country where territorial inequalities depend more on a large geographical division between the richer North and Centre and the poorer South than on spatial segregation within urban systems. In spite of a long sequence of development policies for Southern Italy, the gap between the North/Centre and the South has not been reduced: the percentage of households below the poverty line amounted in 2006 to 22,6% in the South (against 5,2% in Northern and 6,9% in Central Italy)".

In spite of this peculiar situation many EU area-based programs have been experienced over the last 10-15 years. On the other hand, some area-based and integrated programs were funded by national social housing funds. However, both were interpreted mainly according to the 'physical' approach to the problems of deprived urban areas and developed within the Italian land-use planning 'tradition', mainly including actions targeting the built environment and the environment³, whereas social and economic actions were left in the background. This occurred mainly in the South, while some interesting experiences were carried out in some cities in Northern Italy.

What were the target areas of these programs? How were they described? In the following sections we will try to answer these questions by drawing on a case-study.

Insights from a case-study: The PIRP program in the Apulia Region, Southern Italy

In this section, we will consider the main features of urban deprived neighbourhoods in a specific regional area (Apulia Region, in Southern Italy) as they emerge from the urban policies launched by the Apulia region since the mid-2000s. Due to limited space, we will consider in particular a specific policy tool, the PIRP programme: an area-based and integrated urban regeneration programme set up and implemented by the Apulia Region since 2006. However, we will consider the PIRP programme setting up and implementation within the wider framework of regional urban policy. What images of deprivation have been produced within the PIRP policy process? How much and how did they diffuse? How were they given concrete meanings during the implementation of the programmes?

We will analyze the images of deprivation produced during three phases of the policy process by different actors: the call for proposals launched by the Regional government; the program documents set up by the 130 municipalities which answered this call; the first phases of the implementation of the programme at the municipal level.

As far as the first phase⁴ is concerned, it started in 2006 with the launch of the programme. In the call for proposals (cfr. Regione Puglia, 2006), the PIRP program was supposed to target marginal urban areas (i.e. urban areas left aside from the contemporary settlements development processes), either located in the centre of the city or in its peripheries, where problems in the built environment and the environment are associated with social and economic problems. The features of these neighbourhoods highlighted by the call for proposals were: poor housing conditions (also due to social housing shortage); run-down environment; shortage of/poor public spaces and

services; weak social cohesion and economic problems. Besides this 'qualitative' description some 'quantitative' indicators of deprivation were included in the assessment criteria, these being related to: the size of the city, the rate of families waiting for a public dwelling, the rate of families benefiting from public subsidies, the rate of young people and elderly people, the unemployment rate, shortage of public services, shortage of commercial services, run-down buildings. To sum up, the descriptions of deprived neighbourhoods included in the regional call for proposals were drawn on a mix of qualitative and quantitative criteria (drawn on national statistics⁵).

How were these descriptions 'translated' at the local level by actors involved in the setting up of proposals? A mapping activity⁶ analyzing the descriptions of the 'target areas' in the programmes set up at the municipal level to answer the regional call for proposals highlighted that a major feature of deprived neighbourhoods these descriptions shed light on concerned poor public services. In particular, taking into account the built environment and environmental problems, social problems, governance issues, urban regeneration experiences and perceptions, four 'types' of target areas were singled out: deprived enclaves in a central part of the city, often characterized by inadequate public spaces as well as by conflicting uses of public spaces (by their inhabitants and by the rest of the city); peripheral social housing estates, often characterized by lack of/low quality of public spaces and services but (sometimes) schools, vandalism, difficulties of coexistence with groups affected by severe social problems; old towns, often characterized by the loss of public spaces vitality as well as by lack of services; pockets of social housing in the city 'fringe', often characterized by city level public spaces and services on the one hand and by lack of neighbourhood level public spaces and services on the other. Linking deprived marginal neighbourhoods to the city is a major objective of the proposal and social and economic aspects of deprivation are always mentioned.

Last, but not least, the third phase (the implementation of the programme at the local level) started in 2009: since then, the symbolic dimension of the programme has become crucial within the local urban policy arenas. In fact, the programme has become a flagship for local politicians (not only for mayors and urban policy and social housing city councillors, but also for district elected representatives)⁷.

In this phase, which is still in progress, urban actors speeches are centered on the actions which are going to be implemented. Even if often problems are not explicitly mentioned, they can be considered to be implicit in the actions. Hence, as actions funded by the programme concern the built environment and the environment, it is in this phase that the problems of the built environment and of the environment started to prevail largely in the description of the neighbourhoods. Yet, it is in this phase that problems are being somehow redefined according to their solutions. What is more, the descriptions of the neighbourhoods within this phase are more linked to everyday life. Public spaces are central to these descriptions: bad maintenance of streets, lack of basic infrastructures, poor quality of green areas and public services (schools in particular) are the main elements depicting the decay of these areas.

Another major element of the descriptions of 'target areas' during this phase are new public housing. In some cases (mainly in peripheral public housing neighbourhoods where green spaces, even if poor, are often considered to be a positive 'heritage' of modernist urbanism) the building up of new public dwellings is a controversial element opposing two different perspectives on urban regeneration: a first perspective considering these 'remainder' of modernity as a positive element in terms of environmental sustainability; a second perspective assuming the reduction of the shortage of public housing as a main goal in terms of social cohesion.

Some critical issues

At a first sight, the analysis of the changing descriptions of deprived neighbourhoods during the implementation of the

PIRP programme brings us ahead of a paradox: an integrated urban regeneration programme inspired by a 'social innovation' approach was reduced to a rehabilitation programme merely including actions on the built environment and on the environment during its implementation. We know that the descriptions produced during the policy process are not neutral, they are rather the outcome of negotiations between the different actors involved (Sodestrom, Zapf, 1988). However, it is worth understanding this change in a better way.

First, a reason which can explain it is the lack, within the PIRP programme, of funds for social and economic actions: municipalities were invited by the regional call for proposals to integrate at the local level the funds allocated to actions on the built environment and the environment with funds for social and economic actions. However, this was not at all an easy task, as municipalities' sectors were not used to joint actions. Hence, although social and economic problems were always mentioned in the local proposals, this did not involve concrete social and economic actions to be included in the programmes. This circumstance confirms that policy innovation do need innovation in administrative structures in order to become effective in terms of outcomes: integrated area-based urban regeneration programmes do need change in the traditional sector organization of public institutions.

Second, given this situation, one can wonder to what extent can interventions on the built environment and the environment contribute to promote social cohesion. This question suggests us to take into account the different nature of rehabilitation/regeneration urban programmes in this peculiar case: given that Apulian cities are small- or medium-size cities, even mobilizing local people around a 'physical' project is often a way to keep/(re)build social ties and trust towards the capacity of institutions to intervene. What seems to be essential in terms of effective outcomes is rather a participative approach to urban deprivation problems and the involvement of local people in concrete actions, often independently from the nature (physical, social, economic) of the actions people are involved in.

Third, if one does not take into account the wider context of urban regeneration policies in the Apulia region as well as the efforts undertaken by the regional government to push municipalities towards urban sustainable development, it is quite impossible to assess the outcomes of the PIRP programme in terms of production of new descriptions (and awareness) of urban deprivation. From this perspective, even the debate (and the disputes) on the different meanings of urban regeneration we have mentioned above can be considered to be a positive outcome as they are a track of increasing attention by citizens towards different aspects of urban problems.

Notes

¹ For an approach to policy tools which does not consider them as simple techniques, see Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2004.

² For a review of the urban policies which were launched in Italy during the 1990s and 2000s cfr. Governà Saccomanni, 2004; Briata, Bricocoli, Tedesco, 2009.

³ During the 1990s, the articulation of actions and actors which were supposed to be encompassed in these programmes evolved: the main innovations introduced by the first programmes were the promotion of public-private agreements and the area-based approach; the latter included not only physical actions and private actors, but also social and economic actions. Furthermore, they involved the voluntary sector and the local communities.

⁴ We acknowledge that it is not possible to define precisely the articulation of the policy process into defined steps as it is very difficult to define precisely when a phase starts and when it ends. However, a 'loose' reference to different phases is useful for our analysis.

⁵ A discussion on the relationships between different modes of descriptions of deprived urban areas and different approaches in terms of public action is in Estèbe, 2004.

⁶ This mapping activity was carried out within the Development Phase of the Sha.Ke-Sharing urban Knowledge project, funded by the EU territorial cooperation program URBACT II (November 2009-March 2010). See <http://www.urbact.eu>.

⁷ This part of the research is based on some formal and informal interviews to regional and municipal level key-actors as well as on local TV videos and local newspapers articles which are available online. It has been carried out in 2011 within a research program on regional urban policies in two Italian regions (Puglia and Emilia Romagna) and funded by the IUAV University.

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